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Disenchanted Swiss Parliament? Electoral Strategies and Coalition Formation¹

DENISE TRABER
University of Zurich

Abstract: *The Swiss party system has changed considerably since the 1990s. With the increasing electoral success of the right-wing populist Swiss People's Party (SVP), the simultaneous defeat of the center-right and a relatively stable left, it has become more polarized. In what respect have these changes in the electoral arena affected legislative politics in parliament? This article studies the voting behavior of party groups in the Swiss lower house between 1996 and 2013 in six different policy fields. The findings point to a growing level of conflict in the Swiss parliament. Overall agreement among the government parties is reduced, especially at final voting stages of the parliamentary debate. Moreover, electoral politics have become more important for the parties' behavior in parliament: in policy areas that are at the center of their party program, the SP and the SVP are less willing to move away from their original policy stance, with the consequence of increasing isolation in parliamentary votes.*

KEYWORDS: Switzerland, Parliament, Political parties, Consensus democracy, Polarization

INTRODUCTION

In multiparty systems parties face difficult choices: They need to attract enough voters to get elected to political office. Once in office, they are expected to collaborate with other parties, and when bargaining over policy, they have to decide on the level of compromise that is still acceptable to the party leaders and their constituency. The fundamental dilemma is that if they stick to policy positions too far away from the other parties, they lose their influence over policy outcomes. Conversely, if they abandon the policies promised to voters, they risk alienating their supporters and losing votes at the next election (Strøm 1990; Narud 1996; Müller and Strøm 1999).

Switzerland has a peculiar political system in which the four largest parties have formed a government coalition since 1959 (Vatter 2013). Even though the government is elected by parliament, the parliamentary party groups do not have to comply with a coalition agreement and, therefore, voting coalitions differ between votes on different policy issues (Schwarz and Linder 2006). However, the Swiss party system has changed considerably with the increasing electoral success of the right-wing populist Swiss People's Party (SVP), the simultaneous defeat of the center-right and a relatively stable left since the late 1990s.

¹An earlier version of this manuscript was presented at 71st Annual Conference of the Midwest Political Science Association, 11–14 April 2013, Chicago and at the Symposium 'Disenchanted Swiss democracy. Political Switzerland in the 21st Century' at the University of Zurich, January 23–24, 2014. I thank Pascal Sciarini, Simon Hug, Kenneth Benoit, Hanspeter Kriesi, Silja Häusermann, Daniel Bochsler, Fabio Wasserfallen and the three anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this manuscript.

The changing vote shares also led to a shift in the distribution of seats in the Swiss parliament. In what respect have these changes in the electoral arena affected legislative politics in parliament?

I argue in this paper that with the growing importance of elections and electoral campaigns in Switzerland, parliamentary party groups pay more attention to their voters' demands. In particular with regard to issues that are important to their voters, they want to stick to their original position, thereby sending a strong signal and minimizing the risk of punishment at the next election. On other issues, the parties are more willing to compromise.

To test this argument, I study the voting alliances in the lower house of the Swiss parliament from the perspective of the two largest parties to the left and right, the Social Democrats (SP) and the Swiss People's Party (SVP), respectively. More specifically, I consider the frequency of voting alliances with other government parties in salient policy areas and compare the findings with the coalition patterns in other policy domains.

The results show that the level of conflict has increased in the Swiss parliament, mainly due to the SVP's opposition strategy, which became more pronounced after 2007 when their party leader and former minister, Christoph Blocher, was not reelected to the Swiss government. In the SP's core policy domains, on the other hand, there is also a tendency for more opting-out (i.e. forming an opposition together with the Green Party), however, this is on a much smaller scale than the SVP's opposition politics and mainly visible in votes during the detailed deliberation of a bill rather than in final votes. Overall, the results confirm earlier findings of a more polarized Swiss democracy (Häusermann et al. 2004; Vatter 2013; Ladner 2014; Bornschier 2015) and lead to the conclusion that the connection between electoral and legislative politics has become more important in the last two decades.

The article proceeds as follows. The next sections discuss theories of coalition formation, trade-offs between different party strategies and their relevance for the Swiss case. In the empirical part, I present an overview of voting coalitions in different policy areas. The final section discusses the changes and their consequences for Swiss consensus democracy.

OFFICE, POLICY OR VOTES? PARTY STRATEGIES AND COALITION FORMATION IN PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACIES

What are the determinants of legislative coalitions? Early studies of coalition formation were based on the assumption that parties are only interested in the power of office and, therefore, form coalitions based on party size (Riker 1962). This approach characterized legislators as mainly concerned with private benefits and less with policy concerns. However, this view was soon discarded and it is now an established result of coalition studies that the main driver of coalition formation is ideology. Following the spatial model of politics (Downs 1957), Axelrod (1970) argued in his pioneering study that parties want to reduce the "conflict of interest" when forming a government coalition and, thus, coalitions are always "connected" on one policy dimension. In other words, the type of coalitions that are likely to form can be predicted on the basis of the parties' policy preferences. Ideologically coherent coalitions have the important advantage that transaction costs in coalition bargaining are reduced.

Models of coalition formation tend to focus exclusively on the legislative stage of political competition and ignore electoral competition. A more realistic view of coalition bargaining takes the electoral stage into account. This integrated approach to legislative politics is based on the premise that there is a dynamic feedback process at work between electoral and inter-electoral political competition (Austin-Smith and Banks 1988; Benoit

and Laver 2006). Parties anticipate the next election and fear that they will be punished by their voters for not sticking to the promised policy solutions. In this sense, it is expected that parties' decisions to join a coalition are influenced by considerations of their voters' preferences. As a consequence, in multiparty systems parties face a dilemma: on the one hand, their electoral strategies can reduce their coalition potentials if the electoral strategies are too competitive. On the other hand, the parties' electoral fortune depends on their ability to present themselves as distinct alternatives to their competitors (Narud 1996). In this vein, Warwick (2000, 2005a, 2005b) suggests that parties have "policy horizons", that is, the extent to which they – and more importantly, their voters – are willing to accept a policy compromise when taking part in a government coalition. According to this argument, parties will not participate in a government coalition if the policies proposed lie beyond their horizon, because they risk losing the support of their voters if they move too far away from their policy ideals.²

Coalition formation in the Swiss parliament

More broadly speaking, parties in representative democracies face difficult choices between maximizing their control over political office benefits, their impact on public policy and electoral support (Strøm 1990). The different theoretical approaches focusing on each of these goals reflect the more fundamental question of the role of parties in representative democracies (Müller and Strøm 1999). It is a philosophical question whether parties should be *delegates* or *trustees* of their voters. Empirically, policy- office- and vote-seeking motivations are of course closely related and it is likely that parties follow different strategies, depending on the institutional context as well as the issue at stake.

The trade-off between vote-seeking on the one hand, and policy- and office-seeking on the other, is especially relevant for legislative bargaining in parliamentary democracies, since votes are transformed into benefits of office and policy influence. Conversely, the parties' behavior while in office may conflict with vote maximization, depending on the subsequent electoral costs (Strøm 1990).

There is an important difference in the Swiss political institutions compared to other multiparty democracies: the four largest parties have taken part in the government coalition since 1959.³ Thus, even though the government is elected by parliament, all large parties have access to important political offices. Moreover, the parliament has no authority to dismiss the government and vice versa. This has important consequences for legislative bargaining: first, since MPs in the Swiss parliament do not have to comply with coalition agreements, legislative coalitions form on a case-by-case basis and tend to vary between policy areas and stages of parliamentary deliberation (Schwarz and Linder 2006). Second, since the trade-off between vote maximization and control over political office is less pronounced, vote-seeking strategies have, until recently, played only a minor role in legislative decision-making.

² According to Warwick (2005a), this argument differs from a policy-distance argument, insofar as it implies the existence of a clear boundary up to which the parties and their voters are willing to accept a policy compromise, whereas the policy-distance argument merely states that parties are more likely to form a coalition, the closer they are on an ideological dimension.

³ With the exception of a short period in 2008. In December 2007, the Swiss People's Party excluded Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf from the party after she had been elected to the government instead of the SVP's favorite candidate and incumbent, Christoph Blocher. In summer 2008, the other SVP minister, Samuel Schmid, left the party, so that until the election of Ueli Maurer in December 2008, the SVP was not part of the Swiss government.

Earlier studies of coalition formation in the Swiss parliament emphasized the importance of a left-right conflict in the Swiss parliament. Schwarz and Linder (2006; see also Linder and Schwarz 2008) concluded that in most parliamentary votes the SP aligns with the Green Party against a center-right coalition of Christian Democrats (CVP), Liberals (FDP) and the SVP. In addition, it was found that parties often form oversized coalitions (i.e. all parties in government vote together), due to the great risk imposed on decision-makers by the federal system and direct democracy. Because of the shadow of a popular referendum, it was argued, parties were often willing to agree on a minimal consensus (Lehner 1984; Neidhart 1970).

PARTY STRATEGIES IN A CHANGING SWISS DEMOCRACY

However, the Swiss political system has changed considerably in the last two decades. The SVP's success and transformation to a right-wing populist party caused not only a polarization of the Swiss party system, but the party's aggressive political style also led to fiercer party competition in Switzerland (Kriesi et al. 2005), and the SVP's emotional campaigns have changed the character of public debates. Several authors conclude that there is a growing level of conflict in Swiss politics compared to earlier times (Vatter 2008). Important welfare state reforms are blocked (Häusermann et al. 2004; Afonso and Papadopoulos 2015), and consensus, which in earlier times was often found in the pre-parliamentary stages whereby the parliament only slightly amended pre-negotiated solutions, is now more often only achieved in parliament, with the result that parties have gained power and importance in Swiss politics (Sciarini 2014; Sciarini et al. 2015).

In the context of an increasingly polarized Swiss party system (Bornschier 2015), paralleled by mediatization and personalization of Swiss politics (Fischer et al. 2009; Kriesi et al. 2013), elections and electoral campaigns have become more important in Switzerland. As a consequence of these changes, it seems fair to assume that Swiss parties have become more vote-seeking and that election campaigns now play a more important role for strategic behavior in parliament.

Previous studies of coalition formation have found evidence that party system polarization is also visible in the Swiss parliament: according to Linder and Schwarz' (2008; see also Schwarz and Linder 2006) study of coalitions in the lower house between 1996 and 2005, encompassing coalitions of all government parties have formed less often in recent times; instead, the FDP aligned more often with the SVP against a center-left coalition of CVP, SP and the Greens. Moreover, Linder and Schwarz (2008) also show that in later years the right-wing SVP often refuses to take part in the center-right coalition, which leads to the somewhat paradoxical result that, despite their electoral success, they are increasingly isolated in parliament and less able to implement their preferred legislation.

Meanwhile, the SVP has again extended its vote share (despite a small defeat at the 2011 elections), while the major center parties have suffered further vote loss. Therefore, one would expect an even higher level of conflict in the Swiss parliament in recent years. As a consequence of their increased seat share, the SVP is expected to take part in smaller coalitions, because this allows the party to stay closer to the most preferred policy outcome. To the left, the Social Democrats are expected to follow a similar strategy: first, as a consequence of the ideological polarization and second, because of the Green Party's increased seat share in the Swiss parliament, the SP is expected to take part more often in a voting coalition with its most important ally to the left against the center-right and

right-wing parties. In short, I postulate that conflict increases in the Swiss parliament, and oversized coalitions of all government parties form less frequently:

H1: *Voting coalitions of all government parties form less frequently in more recent legislative periods.*

Because parties take the next election into account when bargaining over policies in parliament, their electoral strategies might constrain coalition bargaining (Narud 1996; Benoit and Laver 2006). The electoral strategies – and the flexibility the party leaders expect from their voters – determine to what extent they are willing to accept a policy compromise (Warwick 2005b).

However, even if vote-seeking strategies have become more important for legislative behavior in the Swiss parliament, it may be assumed that the parties' strategic decisions are strongly related to the issue at stake. Parties usually build their program around a small number of issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Green-Pedersen 2007), and it is a well-established result of studies of political behavior that voters pay more attention to some issues than others when deciding which party to support (Krosnick 1990; Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Green and Hobolt 2008; de Vries and Giger 2014). In the Swiss context, this is especially important for the two main opposing parties to the left and right, the SP and SVP, respectively, which have been the main drivers of party system polarization since the 1990s (Vatter 2013; Ladner 2014). Even though the SVP is not a single-issue party and has a history of collaboration with the other parties in government, it has focused on a small number of issues in its recent election campaigns. These are issues on which the electorate is very polarized and where the party managed to win votes because of its extreme position (Brunner and Sciarini 2002; Kriesi and Sciarini 2004). Therefore, one may expect the SVP to be less flexible on these policy issues than on others.

The Social Democrats, on the other hand, have always maintained their focus on social and economic policy issues. With the growing polarization of the Swiss party system, the SP has taken a firm left-wing position and opposes the SVP in social as well as economic matters. While the SP has adopted a more libertarian stance on cultural issues it has, despite internal divisions (Wasserfallen 2010), maintained a conservative economic position and never embraced the more liberal views of the so-called *Third Way* (Ladner et al. 2010; Oesch and Rennwald 2010). According to Oesch and Rennwald (2010), the party's focus on distributional issues is also due to the fact that their constituency is divided on cultural matters. The party is likely to lose the votes of their traditional constituency – the production workers – when the public debate is dominated by cultural issues, such as immigration or citizenship, since these voters tend to have more conservative views and identify with the SVP's claims. Because of this risk that a part of the working class voters will find the SVP's conservative cultural claims more appealing than the libertarian-universalistic values of a new middle class that the SP has integrated, I suppose that the SP wants to send a strong signal to their voters with regard to their core issues, social and economic policies, and, therefore, takes a tough stance in legislative bargaining. Based on these considerations, I formulate my second hypothesis:

H2: *In more recent legislative periods, the Swiss People's Party and the Social Democrats are less likely to take part in voting coalitions in policy areas that are central to their party program.*

In sum, I argue that election campaigns increasingly influence the parties' decision to join a voting coalition in the Swiss parliament. Parties anticipate the next election and calculate the possible electoral costs of their behavior in parliament. The costs will be

greater with regard to issues that are important to the voters, which is why I expect differences in legislative behavior between votes on issues that are central to the party program and issues that are not. On some issues parties would rather stand alone and maintain their original position to send a clear signal to their voters. The following section describes the data and measurement of voting coalitions.

DATA AND METHODS

To investigate the coalitional patterns in the Swiss parliament, I study the voting data available from the 200-member lower house of the Swiss parliament. Votes have been recorded in the *Nationalrat* since 1996, thus, the analysis covers almost five legislative periods: 1995–1999 (45th legislature), 1999–2003 (46th legislature), 2003–2007 (47th legislature), 2007–2011 (48th legislature) and 2011–2013 (49th legislature). In the Swiss parliament, MPs vote on individual articles of a law, which allows to distinguish between votes during the detailed deliberation, and final votes. I use data from the *smartmonitor* database.⁴

I select six policy areas: three policy domains that are central to the SVP's party program (immigration and asylum policy, EU and international relations, and legal policy) and another three on which the SP has centered its electoral campaigns (social, economic, and environmental policies). The choice of these issues is based on data from the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2015a), which provides information about the content of election manifestos. Human coders have allocated the sub-units (so-called *quasi-sentences*) of these manifestos to pre-defined policy categories. The percentage of a specific issue category in the election manifesto indicates how much space the party dedicates to a certain issue, that is, which issues were important in the election campaign and which were not. As shown in Table 1 in the Appendix, the selected issues are also very salient among the Swiss voters.

The selection of comparable issue categories from the parliamentary voting data is unproblematic for the time period after October 2000, since an official classification of each bill according to the thesaurus of the parliamentary services (*Helvetosaurus*) is available. However, the present classification for bills introduced *before* October 2000 in the *smartmonitor* database is based on an automated coding procedure and is not always accurate. To improve comparability of the two time periods, I recoded all bills introduced before October 2000, based on the same criteria applied in the classification of the parliamentary services for the later period.⁵

I define voting coalitions as the common voting behavior of the *majority* of MPs of two parties (party groups). For example, a voting coalition of the SVP and the SP is present if the majorities of both parties vote yes (no) in a specific vote.⁶ I look at the frequency of the common voting behavior of two parties per legislative period. Since the parliament takes many votes on some bills, whereas on others MPs vote only once, and it is likely that coalition patterns in the votes held on a specific bill are very similar, I calculated a

⁴ Data: smartmonitor - The Swiss Legislative Database, <http://www.smartmonitor-database.ch>, last updated November 06, 2014. The analysis focuses on the lower house, because the electronic system has only been in use since 2014 in the upper house. I thank Daniel Schwarz for kindly providing the data.

⁵ The codebook and dataset are available upon request.

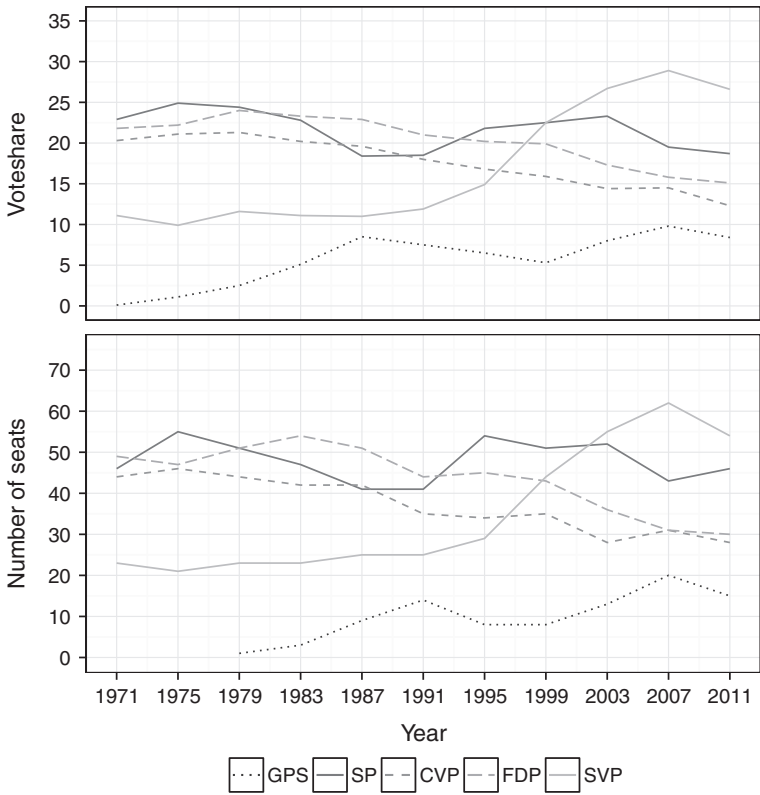
⁶ I deleted the rare cases where the number of yes and no votes within a party group was equal.

weighted mean. More specifically, for each legislative period, I calculated the frequency of coalitions for each bill and then took the average of all bills in this period.

VOTING COALITIONS IN THE SWISS PARLIAMENT BETWEEN 1996 AND 2013

The Swiss party system has changed quite dramatically since the mid-1990s (Ladner 2014). Figure 1 shows the election results and the subsequent distribution of seats in the lower house of the Swiss parliament for the five largest parties since the 1970s. The most important change is the rise of the Swiss People's Party. Since 1995, the SVP has extended its vote share from 15 percent to almost 30 percent (in 2007, with a slight decrease in 2011), which led to a doubling of its seats in parliament. Conversely, the liberal FDP has lost 15 seats between 1995 and 2011. The Christian Democrats (CVP) have also suffered vote loss, but to a lesser degree than the FDP. Among the left parties, the SP's seat share was fairly stable between 1995 and 2007, when the party lost seats in the lower house, mainly to the Green Party, which won another seven seats with a vote share of almost 10 percent among the Swiss electorate (Lutz 2008). This trend was, however, not continued in 2011.

Figure 1: Vote share after elections and seat allocation in the Swiss parliament (lower house) 1971–2011 (Bundesamt für Statistik, Swiss parliament)



The polarization of the Swiss party system is reflected in the distribution of seats in parliament: there has been a strong shift towards the political poles, due to a weakening of the center, a rapidly growing right, and a stable left. In the following, I will investigate whether these changes have affected the coalition patterns in the Swiss parliament.

Coalitions between the Swiss People's Party and the other government parties

According to ideology-based theories of coalitions, parties form a coalition with other parties that share the same political positions. In many instances, however, a party will have to give up its original stance on a specific issue when taking part in a coalition. It seems fair to assume that this willingness to compromise is not equally strong at all times and depends on the parties' strategies – more specifically, on which signals they want to send to the voters. Some policies are more important for certain constituencies and, therefore, figure more prominently in the party program.

Table 1 shows the most important issues in the SVP's party platforms in four elections: 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011, as coded in the Manifesto Project. I show all issues that were mentioned in more than five percent of all sentences (quasi-sentences) in each election platform. Table 1 illustrates the SVP's strong focus on law and order issues and traditional morality. Moreover, an increasing part of the election campaign is dedicated to the opposition to international and European policies (in 2007 and 2011). Unfortunately, the Manifesto Project has only recently included a category for immigration – the SVP's most important campaign issue. It is very likely, however, that the party's references to immigration policy are included in other categories, such as *Law and Order* or *National Way of Life*. The latter category also includes “appeals to pride of citizenship” (Volkens et al. 2015b), which has been a very important campaign issue for the party since the late 1990s.

To study the SVP's voting behavior in detail, I select three policy areas (as categorized by the parliamentary service) central to the party platform: immigration and asylum policy, international policy and relations with Europe (the European Union) and legal policy.⁷ The party's electoral success is largely due to its culturally conservative and isolationist policy stance in these three policy domains (Brunner and Sciarini 2002; Kriesi and Sciarini 2004; Kriesi et al. 2005, 2008). Figures 2 and 3 show the frequency of voting coalitions in these policy areas since 1996 in all votes (Figure 2) and in final votes (Figure 3). It is one peculiarity of the Swiss parliament that MPs vote on detailed aspects of bills before the final vote. Final votes are, in general, more consensual than votes at earlier stages of the decision-making process (Schwarz and Linder 2006). The figures depict five different situations: how often the SVP votes with each of the other government parties, the FDP, CVP and SP; how often the SVP votes against all other government parties; and how often all government parties vote together. I plot the average frequency of a specific coalition type per legislative period (for the number of votes see Table 2 in the Appendix).

The top panels of Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the ideological distance between the SVP and the other government parties: the SVP agrees most often with the center-right FDP, a little less with the centrist CVP, and coalitions with the Social Democrats are especially rare. What is most striking is the decreasing frequency of all voting coalitions over time.

⁷ The category legal policy contains bills with regard to citizenship but also many law and order issues concerning criminal law and the penal system.

Table 1: Issues in the Swiss People's Party's election platform (Percentage of electoral platform, Manifesto Project database)

Year	MP-Category	%
1999	Technology and Infrastructure	11.8
	Law and Order: Positive	9.1
	Culture: Positive	7.6
	Free Market Economy	5.4
	Agriculture and Farmers: Positive	5.4
	National Way of Life: Positive	5.3
	Incentives	5.2
	Welfare State Limitation	5.2
2003	Economic Orthodoxy	13.1
	Technology and Infrastructure	9.5
	Law and Order: Positive	7.6
	Free Market Economy	7.2
	National Way of Life: Positive	5.6
	Traditional Morality: Positive	5.4
2007	Law and Order: Positive	12.0
	Welfare State Limitation	7.5
	Internationalism: Negative	6.8
	Political Authority	6.0
	Free Market Economy	5.4
	Economic Orthodoxy	5.1
2011	European Community/Union: Negative	35.0
	Democracy	27.5
	Political Authority	16.7
	Law and Order: Positive	7.5
	Multiculturalism: Negative	5.0

While the SVP and the FDP on average⁸ formed a voting coalition in more than 75 percent of the votes between 1995 and 1999, they could agree in only about 50 percent of votes in the most recent period since 2011. In all three policy areas there seems to be an increasing conflict between the two parties in the Swiss parliament. This result stands in contrast to the FDP's increasingly right-wing public policy stance on immigration issues (Lachat and Kriesi 2008; Ruedin 2013; Traber 2013). Apparently, the party has chosen a double strategy in these matters: it takes a tougher stance on immigration and asylum issues in their public appearances and election campaigns, but remains more consensus-oriented in parliament. One explanation for this could be that cultural issues are less important to their core electorate, so that the electoral costs of this double strategy are comparably low. However, the growing friction between the center-right and the far-right parties is put into perspective when we look more closely at individual laws. The two largest legislative projects in immigration policy the Swiss parliament has deliberated since 2007 were revisions of the asylum law⁹ and the new citizenship law¹⁰. On the asylum law, the SVP and FDP formed a voting coalition in 76 percent of the votes and on the

⁸ Note that coalition frequency is first calculated on bill-level. The results show averages of all bills.

⁹ 10.052 Asylgesetz. Änderung; 70 votes.

¹⁰ 11.022. Bürgerrechtsgesetz. Totalrevision; 57 votes.

Figure 2: Coalitions in immigration/asylum policy, Europe/international relations, legal policy (all votes)¹¹



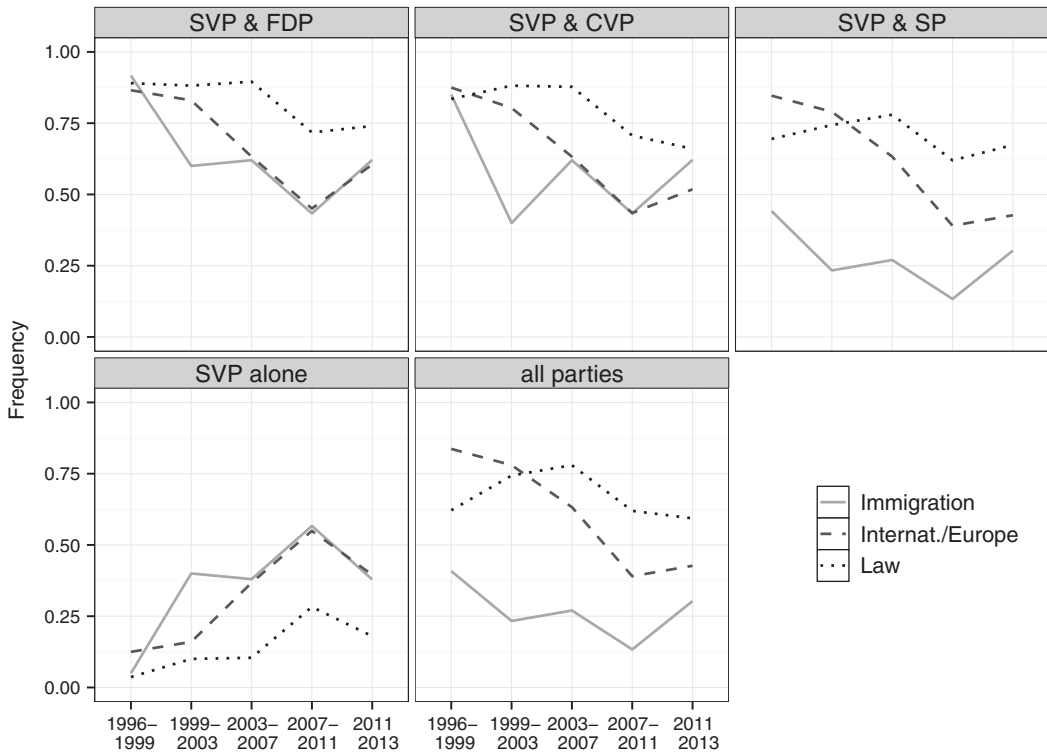
citizenship law in 68 percent. Moreover, it can be seen in Figure 3 that the two parties to the right have aligned more often in final votes on immigration issues since 2011.

With regard to the voting coalitions between the two opposing parties in government, the SVP and the SP, the decline is especially pronounced on EU and international policies. While there was still agreement between the two parties in 60 percent of votes between 1995 and 1999, they have taken the same side in only one out of four parliamentary votes since 2011 (85%/43% in final votes).

The lower panels of Figures 2 and 3 are complementary to the others: as a consequence of the growing friction between the SVP and the other government parties, the SVP stands increasingly isolated. Moreover, an encompassing consensus between all government parties has become especially rare on policy issues that are central to the SVP's electoral campaign. Whereas the polarization has always been quite strong in immigration and asylum policy, it has become much stronger in the domain of EU policy and on legal issues after 2007, when the former SVP-minister, Christoph Blocher, was not reelected to the federal council and the SVP intensified its opposition behavior in parliament. One indicator of this changing party

¹¹ Coalitions are defined as the common voting behavior of the *majorities* of two party groups. For example, an SVP-FDP voting coalition is present if a majority of the SVP party group votes yes, and at the same time a majority of the FDP party group votes yes.

Figure 3: Coalitions in immigration/asylum policy, Europe/international relations, legal policy (final votes)

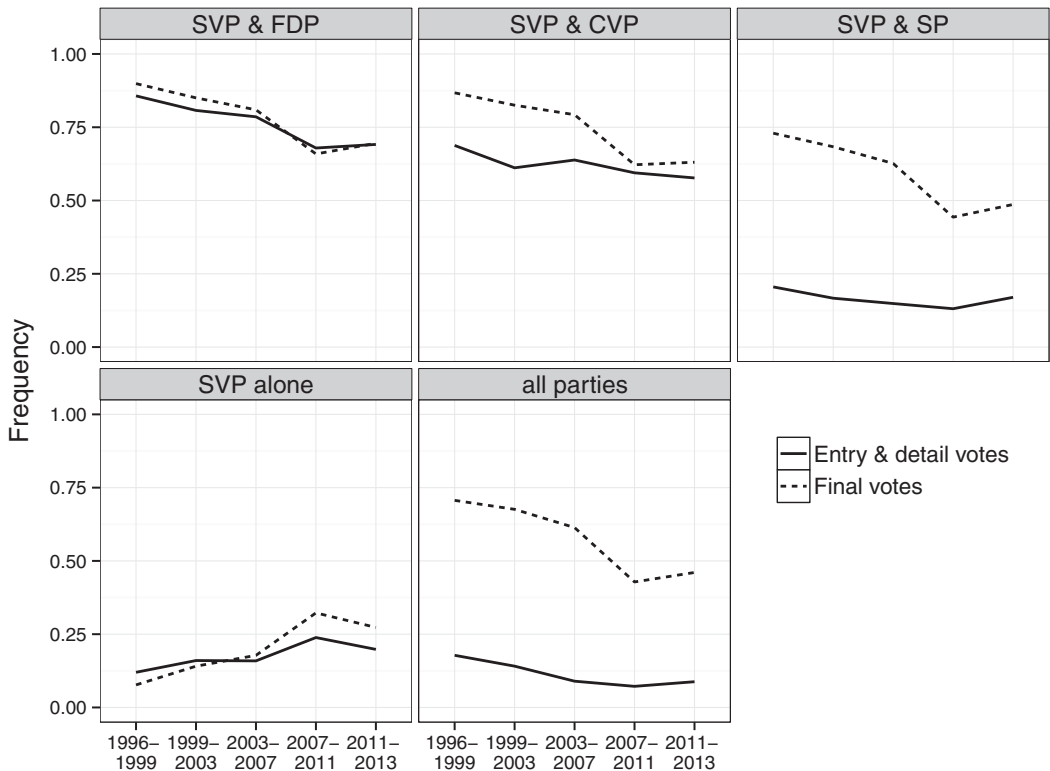


strategy is the number of parliamentary motions, postulates and initiatives submitted (see Table 2 in the Appendix): between 1995 and 1999 only 15 percent of all bills in European relations and international policy were parliamentary motions or postulates; since 2011 this number has increased to over 60 percent of bills. Likewise, in immigration policy and legal issues the percentage of parliamentary bills increased from around 55 percent to around 80 percent. In policy domains that are important for the SVP's public image, the electoral campaign is shaping the party's behavior in parliament, resulting in a declining consensus and stronger polarization.

So far, we have looked at very polarized policy areas. To provide a more general view of the SVP's voting behavior, Figure 4 shows the frequency of coalitions in all policy areas, distinguishing between final votes, and votes during detailed deliberation of a proposal.¹² The final votes resemble more closely the picture described above: since 1996 the parliament has become more polarized, the SVP more often opposes the other parties and, as a consequence, the government parties reach an overall consensus in less than 50 percent of the final votes in recent periods. On a smaller scale, conflict has also increased in votes during detailed deliberation, especially with regard to the SVP-FDP coalition and the SVP opposing the other government parties. However, when comparing Figures 2/3

¹² This category also includes votes at the beginning of the parliamentary debate, when the parliament decides between entering detailed deliberation and rejection of the proposal.

Figure 4: Coalitions SVP, all policy areas



and Figure 4, it becomes apparent that the changes are especially pronounced in those policy areas on which the SVP focuses its election campaign. Thus, in line with my hypothesis, the party's strategies in parliament seem to depend on the policy issue at stake. In the second part, I investigate whether the SVP's strongest opponent on the left side, the SP, uses similar coalition strategies in parliament.

Coalitions between the Social Democrats and the other government parties

Following the same logic, I select three policy areas central to the SP's party program. Table 2 shows the issues that were discussed in more than five percent of the sentences (quasi-sentences) in the election manifestos of 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011. Not surprisingly, the manifestos mostly cover social and economic issues as well as environmental questions. Welfare state expansion is the largest category in all elections, except in 2007, when the main focus was also on environmental protection.

As a consequence, Figures 5 and 6 look more closely at coalition patterns in these policy areas. Again, the upper panels depict the average frequency of voting coalitions between the SP and the other government parties, and the lower panels plot the frequency of isolated votes as well as the frequency of an overall consensus between the government parties. The results corroborate the earlier findings. Although the changes are less pronounced when we consider all votes in parliament (Figure 5), with regard to final

Table 2: Issues in the Social Democrat's election platform (Percentage of electoral platform, Manifesto Project database)

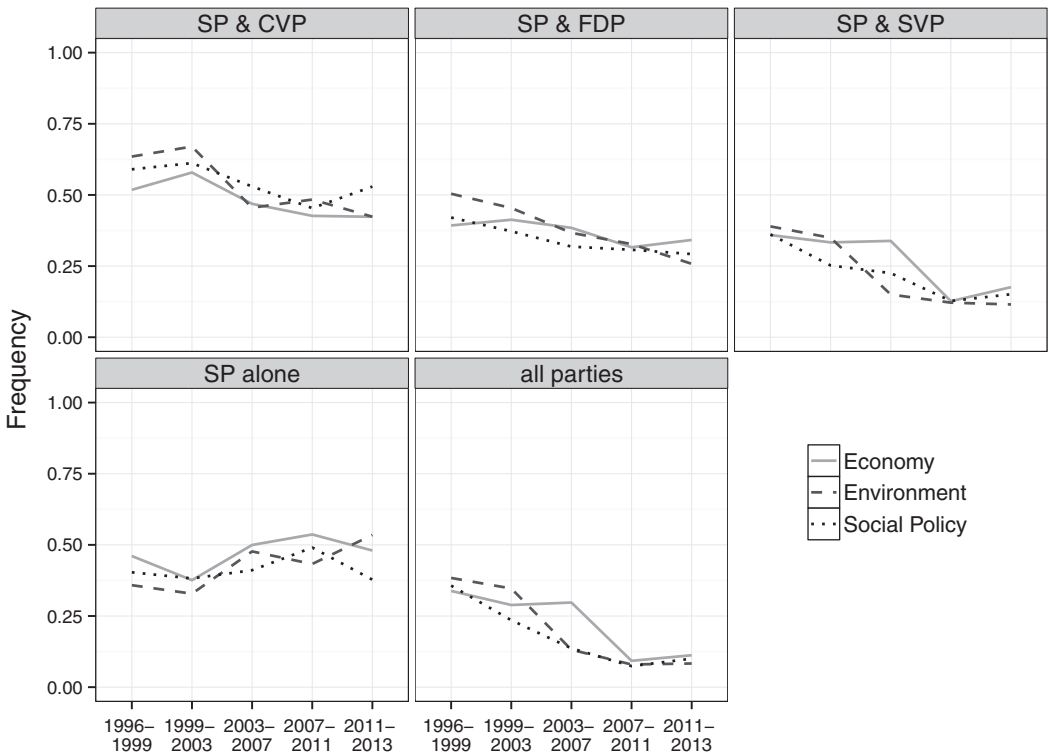
Year	MP-Category	%
1999	Welfare State Expansion	12.4
	Non-economic Demographic Groups	9.8
	Equality: Positive	8.0
	Market Regulation	7.0
	Underprivileged Minority Groups	6.4
	Internationalism: Positive	5.4
	Education Expansion	5.4
2003	Welfare State Expansion	11.6
	Environmental Protection: Positive	9.1
	Labor Groups: Positive	9.0
	Market Regulation	7.0
	Equality: Positive	7.0
	European Community/Union: Positive	6.4
	Internationalism: Positive	6.1
2007	Environmental Protection: Positive	13.5
	Equality: Positive	12.9
	Market Regulation	8.5
	Welfare State Expansion	8.0
	Labor Groups: Positive	5.4
2011	Welfare State Expansion	28.2
	Market Regulation	15.5
	Education Expansion	14.1
	Equality: Positive	11.3
	Controlled Economy	8.5
	Political Authority	5.6
	Environmental Protection: Positive	5.6

votes, it is clearly the case that the SP has voted less frequently with the other government parties in recent years (Figure 6). The divide is especially large in recent times between the SP and the SVP; they formed a voting coalition in less than 20 percent of votes on economic, social or environmental issues between 2011 and 2013¹³ compared to almost 40 percent between 1996 and 1999.¹⁴ The frequency of this voting alliance has, moreover, declined sharply in economic policy since 2007, especially in final votes, which is probably due to the increasingly differing views between the left and the right since the beginning of the financial crisis.

In social policy, the pattern is a little more heterogeneous. Although the disagreement between the SP and the other government parties has grown between 1996 and 2003, there is a trend towards more center-left voting coalitions in recent times. Since 2011, the CVP and the SP have formed a voting coalition in more than 50 percent of all votes and in 85 percent of the concluding votes. Thus, the sharp decline of overall agreement among the government parties in social policy apparently is not due to the SP standing alone, but again to the more extreme position of the SVP in this policy area. It should be mentioned, however, that the social policy category subsumes a large number of different issues.

¹³ 18% in economic policy, 15% in social policy and 12% in environmental policy.

¹⁴ 36% in economic and social policy, 39% in environmental policy.

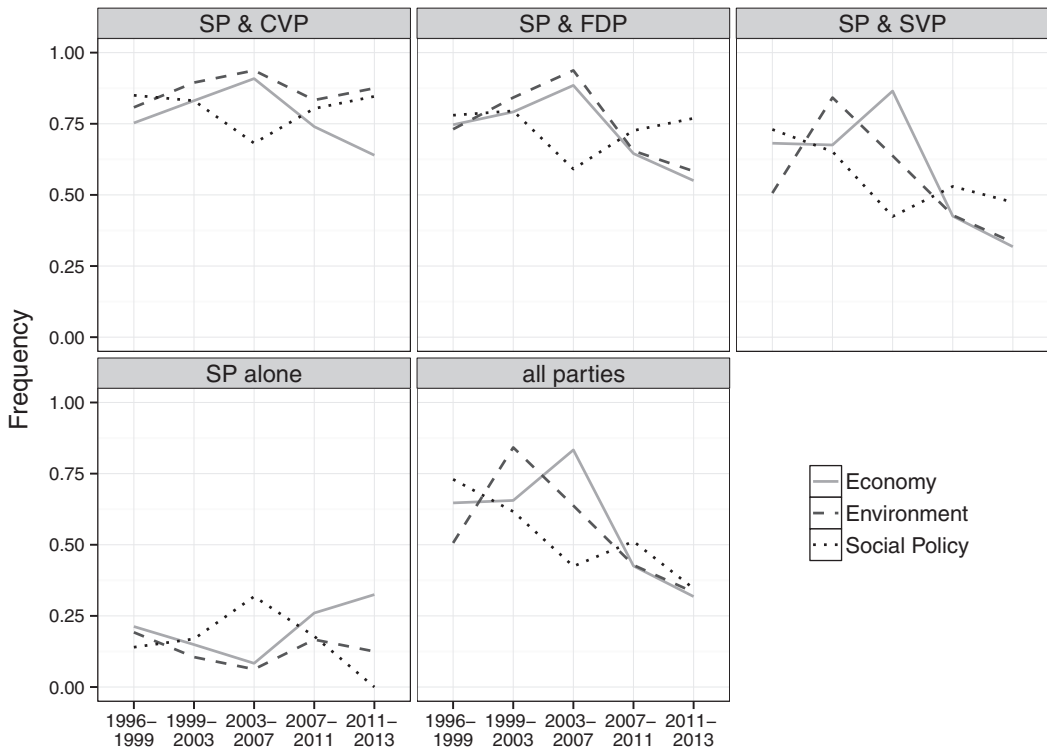
Figure 5: Coalitions in economy, social and environmental policy (all votes)¹⁵

Previous research has shown that the picture is different when we look more closely at important welfare state reforms in recent years (Afonso and Papadopoulos Forthcoming).

To complement this view of the SP's coalition behavior, Figure 7 plots the frequency of the same voting coalitions as averages over all policy areas. Confirming the general view, Figure 7 illustrates the ideological left-right divide in the Swiss parliament, which is quite stable. Over the whole time period, the SP stands in opposition against the other government parties in about 50 percent of the detail votes. However, what is most striking compared to the coalitions between the SVP and the other parties are the different levels of agreement in final votes. Unlike the SVP, the SP is often in opposition in votes on detailed articles, but much less in final votes. Apparently, at these final stages of the parliamentary process, the SP is willing to agree with the other parties, which stands in stark contrast to the SVPs opposition behavior. For an illustration of this difference, we can compare the lower left panels of Figures 4 and 7: whereas the frequency of an isolated SVP in final votes has increased from 8 to 27 percent between 1996 and 2013, the SP's opposition in final votes has remained relatively stable between 15 and 19 percent of votes.

¹⁵ Coalitions are defined as the common voting behavior of the *majorities* of two party groups. For example, an SP-FDP voting coalition is present if a majority of the SP party group votes yes, and at the same time a majority of the FDP party group votes yes.

Figure 6: Coalitions in economy, social and environmental policy (final votes)



Overall, these findings reveal that the left-right division is still the most important conflict in the Swiss parliament (see also Figure 1 in the Appendix). Furthermore, in line with the theoretical expectations, the results point to an increasing isolation of the Social Democrats – or more precisely of the Social Democrats and the Green Party – in some issue areas central to the SP's party program.

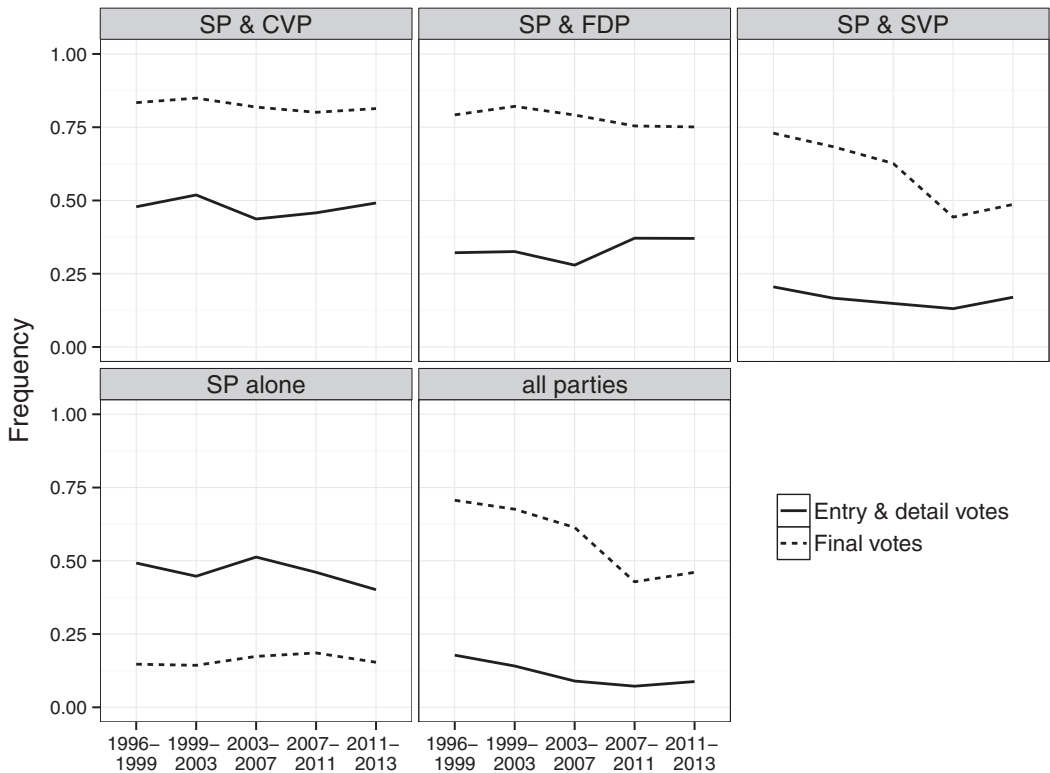
DISCUSSION

This paper investigates voting coalitions in the Swiss parliament over five legislative periods (1996–2013). The main interest lies in changes over time as a result of a changing party system: how has the shift in the distribution of seats in parliament and, more generally, the ideological polarization in the Swiss party system, affected the legislative coalitions?

Focusing on the two government parties that are mostly responsible for the polarization of the party system, the Swiss People's Party (SVP) and the Social Democrats (SP), I study the argument that legislative behavior in the Swiss parliament is increasingly influenced by electoral considerations. Especially in those policy areas that are central to the SP and the SVP's party platforms, I expect the two parties to stick more closely to their claims made in the electoral campaign and, therefore, be less compromising.

The growing polarization of Swiss politics is clearly visible in parliament: A first indication is that in recent years the frequency of encompassing coalitions with all major parties has diminished dramatically. Apparently, the political decision-making process less

Figure 7: Coalitions Social Democrats, all policy areas



often results in broad consensus; the changes are especially pronounced with regard to final votes. It is mostly the SVP that has taken a tougher stance and followed an opposition strategy. The confrontation has increased visibly since the non-election of the former SVP-minister and party leader, Christoph Blocher, in 2007. This being said, the left-right conflict is still the most important conflict in Swiss politics and has even become more salient in some policy areas, such as economic policy.

The findings lead to interesting conclusions for Swiss consensus democracy. The literature on the Swiss legislative process has generally assumed that actors build oversized coalitions because of the uncertainty introduced into the political process by direct democracy (Lehner 1984). The results show that this is not the case anymore. The frequency of oversized coalitions in parliament is diminishing.

The fact that the political process does, in many instances, not end with an overarching consensus has until now not been a threat to the political system. Because parties are not bound by a formal coalition agreement, they are free to join different coalitions in different policy areas and this feature of the consensus-oriented institutions still has a stabilizing effect for Swiss democracy. However, even though the success of the SVP and the party's opposition-style politics in parliament so far has not led to political stalemate, consensus in the Swiss parliament has decreased dramatically and the SVP's as well as the SP's strategies have caused blockage of important reforms, for example with regard to the welfare state (Afonso and Papadopoulos Forthcoming). In this sense, the results are complementary to Vatter's (2008; see also Sciarini et al. 2015) more general analysis of

changes in the political institutions. The Swiss democracy can no longer be considered an *ideal type* of consensus democracy (Lijphart 1999), but has become a *Normalfall*, a political system that combines consociational and competitive features, similar to other European countries. How Switzerland will deal in the long run with the challenges arising from increasing political competition and polarization remains an open question for now.

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Appendix I

Figure A1: Frequency of different coalitions in the Swiss parliament

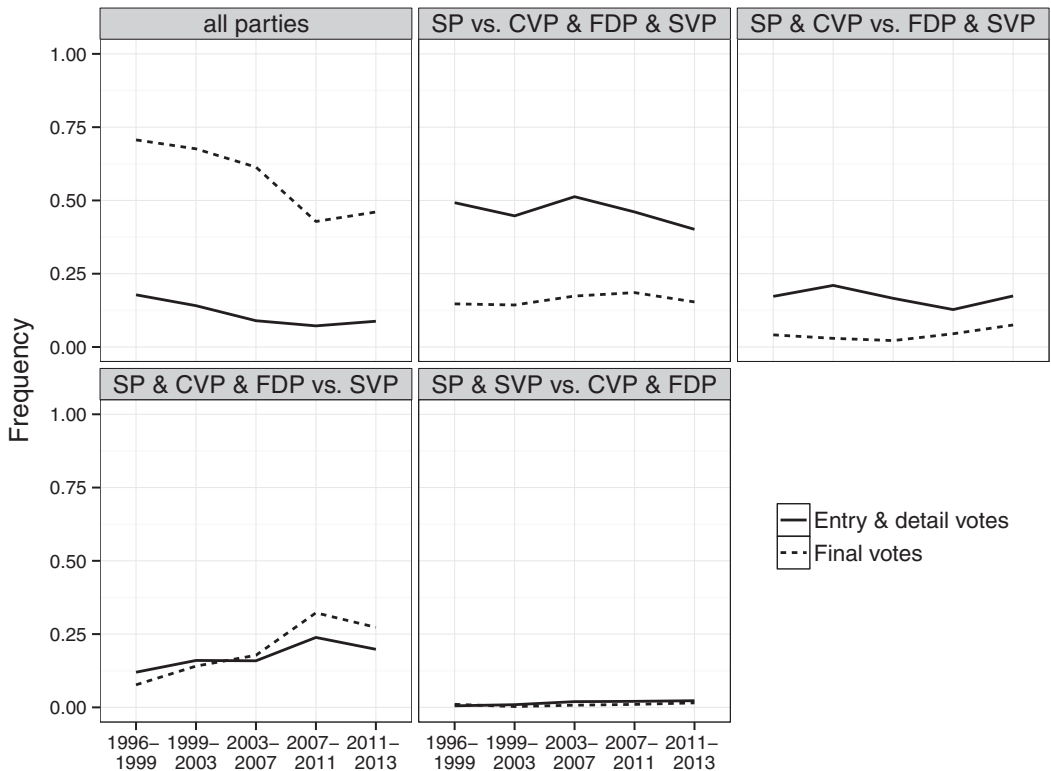


Table A1: Salience of different policy areas according to the “most important problem” – question in the Swiss post-election survey selects (% of respondents who mentioned the respective issue)

	1999	2003	2007	2011
Immigration / Integration / Asylum	32%	21.4%	25.7%	18.4%
European integration	13.8%	3.90%	4.5%	4%
Law and order	0.9%	1.9%	8.3%	3.8%
Economy	1.8%	1.1%	1.5%	15.60%
Social security / welfare state	8.8%	19.3%	16.2%	10.5%
Labor market	16.4%	15.6%	7.3%	11%
Environment	2.1%	2.5%	12.7%	14.9%

Notes: The responses were aggregated differently in 1999. The salience of EU-issues appears low – however, these are aggregated results provided by selects, and it is quite possible that many EU-related issues are subsumed in the immigration/asylum category.

The numbers for environment in 2007 and 2011 include energy issues.

Table A2: Number of votes in issue areas

Issue	1995-1999			1999-2003			2003-2007		
	number of votes	number of bills	number of motions/postulates/parl. initiatives	number of votes	number of bills	number of motions/postulates/parl. initiatives	number of votes	number of bills	number of motions/postulates/parl. initiatives
Immigration and asylum policy	153	20	11 (55%)	164	45	39 (87%)	289	19	8 (42%)
Relations with Europe / International policy	200	53	8 (15%)	196	77	23 (30%)	276	75	30 (40%)
Legal policy	547	71	38 (54%)	323	104	56 (54%)	356	88	47 (53%)
Economy	344	70	36 (51%)	276	104	69 (66%)	342	110	73 (66%)
Social issues	178	49	23 (47%)	418	87	63 (72%)	240	74	52 (70%)
Environment	107	28	9 (32%)	112	43	25 (58%)	177	61	48 (79%)
All Issues: Entry and Detail	2137	394	206 (52%)	2467	662	461 (70%)	2680	766	557 (73%)
All Issues: Final	535	259	0 (0)	673	339	0 (0)	597	289	0 (0)

Issue	2007-2011			2011-2013		
	number of votes	number of bills	number of motions/postulates/parl. initiatives	number of votes	number of bills	number of motions/postulates/parl. initiatives
Immigration and asylum policy	226	137	124 (91%)	220	58	44 (76%)
Relations with Europe / International policy	535	177	104 (59%)	156	74	45 (61%)
Legal policy	519	214	177 (83%)	321	147	120 (82%)
Economy	677	244	207 (85%)	287	153	128 (84%)
Social issues	504	177	148 (84%)	176	104	91 (88%)
Environment	270	98	86 (88%)	130	78	66 (85%)
All Issues: Entry and Detail	4198	1713	1412 (82%)	2638	1195	970 (81%)
All Issues: Final	804	372	3 (1%)	550	260	0 (0)

Denise Traber is a senior researcher (Oberassistentin) at the Department of Political Science, University of Zurich. Her research focuses on party competition in Switzerland and Europe, on political behavior and representation. *Address for Correspondence:* Department of Political Science, University of Zurich, Affolternstrasse 56, 8050 Zurich, Switzerland. E-mail: traber@ipz.uzh.ch.